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The New York

TV's Top Anchormen Assess White House

Times

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Policy Toward Network News

Q: We'd like to start off by asking you about Clay T. Whitehead and the great deal of comment generated by his Indianapolis speech. What do you think his essential purpose was in combining the promise of a liberalized license-renewal bill for station owners with an attack on "ideological plugola" and "elitist gossip" on network news?

CHANCELLOR: When he made that speech, a lot of people reacted very strongly. There were people saying, "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!" In looking into it, there are a couple of things we have to keep in mind. One is that the people in charge of writing up this legislation—and I believe it has not arrived at the Congress yet—don't see how any proposals can be made to get machinery that would effectively monitor news programs before they come out. And they told us that's not their intent.

The second thing is that the threat to the local station owner has to be thought out. And my view of that is if the F.C.C. should ever decide to take a license away from a station owner because the station carried the wrong kind of news, the chances are very much that it would be overturned in the courts.

And I think we're talking about, from the station owner's point of view, a very re-

mote possibility. What we're left with is another example of the Administration issuing vague threats about us and using some of those speeches as a platform for code words like "plugola" and "gossip."

But as far as the broadcasting industry is concerned, I don't see an awful lot in this practically. I do sense a kind of a colder wind, but we've had a lot of that.

CRONKITE: I don't think it's just enough to dismiss it as a colder wind, John, inasmuch as it is an escalation of the continuing attacks against us. I'd agree with you on the technical aspects of it—the problem of drawing legislation that could do the job that Dr. Whitehead suggested he wanted done. I think that's probably why the bill is still kicking around the halls in Washington. They're trying to find a formula under which they can make this thing work in some practical way.

I think far more important is what it indicates—that there's no retreat on the part of the Administration from what I believe to be its firm intent to drag down the press and all of us in broadcast journalism as well. And this is another step to attempt to build a backwash of protest from our affiliate stations to our operations in the network and thus create an added area of influence and pressure against us.

REASONER: I don't know

what he [Whitehead] meant and I don't know that he did. I don't think of a conspiracy in terms of the Government planning step by step what they're doing against the press, any more than we have a regular meeting to plan what we'll lead with that night among the three networks. The New York Times and The Washington Post.

But I think [there] is an atmosphere within the Administration in which this kind of thing is encouraged by anybody who has a bent for it and has a role. In other words, I don't think President Nixon or anybody talked to Dr. Whitehead ahead of time. I suspect that the proposal for the new legislation grew up in a very bureaucratic way, but nobody who had anything to do with it is unconscious of the general Administration attitude.

SMITH: I think, with Walter, that it is to be taken seriously. I think, with Harry, that Mr. Whitehead didn't know fully what he was talking about—as Senator [John O.] Pastore [Democrat of Rhode Island] proved when he dismantled him in public at the hearings [last month on the license-renewal bill].

But it's a quantum jump. I did not disagree or oppose Agnew's original speech [in November, 1969, assailing

"bias" in some newspapers and networks] as much as I think Walter did. It seems to me that if we give them hell they've got the right to give us hell. And he proposed no structural changes in the broadcasting-industry part. But Whitehead did. And they're going to have one definite effect. Getting local stations to take documentaries in the United States is extremely hard. In Britain they have mass audiences for documentaries. We have to fight our way.

He will give an excuse to many local stations who didn't want to take documentaries in the first place, not to take documentaries they would like to replace with reruns of "I Love Lucy." I think they can't do much about the evening news, because if Harry Reasoner is about to utter a piece of elitist gossip, they will never know until he's done it. It's too late to turn him off.

CRONKITE: Sometimes

perceive is that we may all be doing our jobs better because the Administration has accused us of being biased against them. And, therefore, I think a lot of editors all over the country—people who have a professional conscience—are going to make sure that their reputations remain intact in this period. I think that there are probably more column inches on Watergate than there might have been otherwise.

But there is more attention paid to the Administration because we are trying to answer to our own ethical standards—those standards having been brought into question by the Administration. It was, in fact, more relaxed in previous Administrations, and I think in some ways we may be doing a better job.

SMITH: One of the points Agnew made was "instant commentary." I was delighted in talking with Eric Sevareid the day before yesterday to find out he agreed with me—he hates to do instant commentary on something that's just broken, of which we

have no warning. And I would rather like to dispense with instant commentaries and have a little while to think and then give a sensible commentary. So I think it might have helped in that respect.

Q: Even though they may not have changed the way you present things, to what extent have the Agnew and Whitehead speeches damaged the credibility of network news among your listeners?

CHANCELLOR: The mail that came to us in large amounts after the first Agnew speech was about half for us and half against us. Since then there has been a change. And the change is that the Vice President and this Administration have given a sort of legitimacy to views that millions of Americans held and had not articulated before they came out in the open with it.

For a long time in the country, people got their news about the country from newspapers, and not all the

Harry doesn't know it, too.

CHANCELLOR: I'd like to disagree with Reasoner. I do think that at the higher levels of the White House there was a clear knowledge of what the Whitehead proposal was. I can't really quite believe that an Administration so sophisticated in the mechanics of American media would not realize the implications of that speech and discuss it at a very high level.

I don't know if the President had anything to do with it personally. But certainly he bears a very strong responsibility for what his man said.

CRONKITE: I go along with that, too. I also wouldn't use the word "conspiracy." I used it once and I'm sorry I did.

But I believe that certainly this is all part of a basic plan. And if the plan isn't laid out on paper, step by step, item by item and time by time, at least the philosophy runs through the Administration. And I cannot believe that this isn't part of

the general movement in that direction.

Q: Starting with Vice President Agnew, have the attacks by the Administration affected TV coverage in any way?

CHANCELLOR: I saw a certain drawing back, I think, in being more careful on the part of journalism in America generally, after the Agnew attacks.

I think people in our business, before they use a certain word or phrase, ought to think twice about it. And I think for a period there people were thinking three times. I don't personally, in my own work and in the network's work, see that there have been any serious changes of any kind.

SMITH: It has no effect whatever. If it does make people think three times instead of twice I think that's good. In fact, I think five times before I say something.

CRONKITE: I don't think one time frequently before saying something, I'd have

to admit. But that's not good journalism. We should be very, very careful. And I think that probably these attacks have helped us pull up our boots a little bit and practice our profession with a little more expertise than we applied before, perhaps. And I think that that's probably a good effect.

But it's a side effect from what the intent was, and I cannot agree in any way with the intent. But to answer your question more directly, has it affected us as to the courage with which we tackle the Administration? I think that the clear indications are that that is not the case. And we're in trouble because of it. Watergate and the grain-scandals stories particularly, during the campaign, show that we have not been intimidated to that extent.

Now I would not say, however, that it has not had a subconscious effect, and that worries me a great deal. I try to analyze my own emotions about these things when a matter comes up to us for decision. The first in-

dication to me is that I think I want to pull back a little bit, kind of throw up my dukes and take a quick step back before I launch out again. And that worries me, that reflex action. It indicates that something subconsciously is going on.

REASONER: I think there's another effect which has been very real, and which I think may have been in the minds of some of the people before Mr. Agnew made his speech. How much time have we spent since November, 1969, in just this kind of a meeting? Or in various kinds of introspection? I don't know what per cent of our total energies—but 10 per cent maybe, or 20 per cent, that should be occupied in more direct responsibilities.

CHANCELLOR: There's something that needs to be added here, and that is that we are living in a slightly different climate for journalism in America today than we did before the Vice President and this Administration made their attacks on us.

One of the changes that I

Network television's four leading anchormen—John Chancellor of the National Broadcasting Company, Walter Cronkite of the Columbia Broadcasting System and Harry Reasoner and Howard K. Smith of the American Broadcasting Company—were invited by The New York Times to participate in a round-table discussion last week to explore the relationship between the Nixon Administration and the television news medium.

The newsmen assessed proposed changes in Government policy and responded to charges by Clay T. Whitehead, director of the White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, of "ideological plugola" and "elitist gossip" on network newscasts. They also examined the ramifications of such criticism on television news and described their roles in shaping the nightly reports seen by millions of Americans.

All appeared at the informal meeting with editors and reporters of The Times much as they do on the home screen

—tanned, relaxed, urbane, witty and articulate.

Mr. Chancellor and Mr. Cronkite characterized Mr. Whitehead's condemnation of network news as a "colder wind" or "escalation" of Administration attacks that began in the fall of 1969 with criticism of the media by Vice President Agnew. They contended that there had been clear knowledge at the higher levels of the White House of the Whitehead proposals and their implications.

Mr. Reasoner said he did not think of a "conspiracy in terms of the government planning step by step what they're doing against the press"—a view shared by Mr. Smith, his colleague at A.B.C. Mr. Smith emphasized that he did not disagree with Vice President Agnew's original criticisms, but thought that Dr. Whitehead's proposals, because they sought structural changes in the broadcasting industry, should be viewed in a different light.

All four newsmen said the criticism had not affected

the networks' "courage" to tackle the Administration; indeed, they offered evidence to indicate that the criticism had made television newsmen even more determined to do a better job.

But Mr. Smith predicted a harder road for news documentaries. Mr. Reasoner deplored "a feeling among a certain segment of the audience that the networks are either their adversaries or their friends." And Mr. Chancellor and Mr. Cronkite were critical of what they viewed as an increasing "politicization" of the issue of the media vs. the Administration.

Opinion was divided on the need for Federal legislation to give journalists the privilege to withhold from grand juries either confidential information obtained during newsgathering activities or the source of that information.

Excerpts from the discussion, in which the newscasters said they expressed their own opinions, follow:



The New York Times/Willem E. Sauro

Newsmen discuss relations between Administration and television. From left: John Chancellor of N.B.C., Walter Cronkite of C.B.S., Harry Reasoner and Howard K. Smith of A.B.C.

newspapers were as good as The New York Times. And not all those papers had readers like The New York Times. So that when I was a young man, people read the sports pages and the comics and occasionally looked at the front page and the editorial page, but got the information they wanted to get when they wanted to get it about their society.

Television came along and changed all that. Now, after network television news began to be a real mechanism in the country, it was serious news put out by serious men. And for the first time the American people were systematically exposed every night to news that comes in a brutal way. On television you can't switch around. If you don't want to read about the assassinations you don't have to in a newspaper. On television you take it or you leave it off completely.

This made a lot of people unhappy with the news they got. The news hadn't changed all that much, although the society was changing, but it was the manner in which they got it. And there were vague and unspecified feelings about the news, and people didn't much like it.

I remember we all then began to get, "Why don't you put a little more good news on, it's too bad." And into that attitude came this Administration, the President and the Vice President, saying that the news isn't any good because those people aren't any good.

And this is the change that has come about. They now have for their fears, for their dissatisfaction about the news—they now can look to the White House, which says, "Yes, you're right, and it's those bad people who are doing it." And that's been serious.

SMITH: May I say that I think that if we give them hell they're entitled to give us hell, as long as they don't suggest restrictions on freedom.

CRONKITE: But unfortunately they have coupled this with suggestions and restrictions on freedom.

SMITH: The last batch of subpoenas [from a variety of sources against newspapermen around the country] worries me more than anything.

Q: Have the latest attacks been possible only because Spiro Agnew planted the seeds of doubt about the credibility of the press, particularly the Establishment press, in the minds of the

American people years before?

SMITH: May I observe that we've planted seeds of doubt in the public's mind about the credibility of people in government. And I don't think it's bad if they criticize us. I don't think we're above criticism, as long as there are no specific restrictions on freedom of the press, which I think was basically the position of Agnew.

But I think we're in a new phase here now, which is worrisome. I don't think that was. There should be doubts about The New York Times and there should be doubts about us.

REASONER: I think that what goes to your question is: Has there been a kind of an adversary attitude in audiences that was not there before? A lot of the mail would say "I'm leaving you and going back to Cronkite because you're a liar," or the other way around—whether one network is more fair than the other.

There's a feeling among a certain segment of the audience that the networks are either their adversaries or their friends in American social life. It's a point which even Senator Pastore misses. In his dialogue with Dr. Whitehead he talked about the right of reporters to give their "plugola" just as much as the President. And neither he nor Dr. Whitehead conceded the possibility, or apparently recognized the possibility, that we aren't plugola-ing anything.

CRONKITE: What I object to in the criticism from the White House is not the fact that there is criticism, not even the fact that they would try to raise their own credibility by attacking ours. But what has happened is that this Administration, through what I believe to be a considered and concerted campaign, has managed to politicize the issue of the press vs. the Administration to the point that now we come to the real crunch, which is the matter of our actual freedoms to operate, our freedom to criticize, our right to do that. Our ability to function as journalists without harassment by an offended grand jury, whether it be county, state or Federal, or an investigative unit of the Federal Government.

We've come to that dangerous state now with the press in a position that to defend the right of the people to know—that is, to defend freedom of speech and

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press — is to somehow or other be anti-Administration.

Thus politicizing the issue, they have again proved to be highly divisive in this society, and have created two Americas—one that believes in freedom of speech and press and one that doesn't.

That's a vast oversimplification, of course, but still, when you get to the heart of it, we're down to that kind of a basic, and that is what concerns me today—the trend in this direction.

CHANCELLOR: I support Walter in this because the subpoenas have gone mainly to reporters for organizations that have been critical of the Nixon Administration. I don't see them going after reporters who've worked on stories the Administration regards as favorable.

Going beyond that, I think that there is a feeling, perhaps on the part of the President, surely on some of his senior aides, that centrally produced information in the American society is somehow wrong. That The New York Times, which runs a large supplementary wire service; The Los Angeles Times and The Washington Post, which run a large wire service; that the networks which produce for the country's centrally produced news, are somehow wrong for the country.

I think that there are people in the White House who would like to see a fragmentation of the way in which we get news in America, that they would be more comfortable with that news, and that this is not necessarily just being a Republican or a Democrat, but that this would suit their attitudes about the country. I think they'd like to have revenue sharing in information. They'd like to put the money on the stump and have a lot of small localized operations telling the American people what's going on.

Q: To pursue that point about fragmentation of news, what's wrong with that?

SMITH: It's only not wrong, it's happening. In this city you have three network news programs per evening, but you have many more non-network news programs. It's true in Washington and most big cities. So there's not just three sources of information on television. And local programs often have higher ratings in their locality than network programs

CHANCELLOR: I don't see how, in a country this size with problems of Federal and state relationships, with an Executive growing more powerful every day, with foreign relations taking place at sometimes blinding speed and in great secrecy, that you can get along in a society based on an informed public without having centrally—somebody has to produce it centrally. Every other country does it.

CRONKITE: I would suggest that we would be well off in this country if we had a good A.P. or U.P.I. of television news, if there were a way that a local station could indeed produce its newspaper of the air.

I don't think, however, that even with that service, that this would mean that television network news should not continue to function. Unfortunately, they [local stations] cannot do the job today and they're not very likely to be willing to pay the price to organize and to provide a service adequate to putting out a full broadcast with all of the national and international news included, on a daily basis.

REASONER: With all due respect to The Times, this is the first time in history that we've had the equivalent of national newspapers—the three network news broadcasts. A client paper for The Times or The Post or any body else can pick and choose. But an affiliate carries A.B.C., C.B.S. or N.B.C.—and in most American cities that's the only alternative to the paper.

SMITH: A main source of information and opinion for upper-middle-class Americans is news magazines. There are only three of those. There have been no complaints of them.

Q: What do you see as the most severe limitations on what you're doing? And how would you remedy them?

CRONKITE: I think it's a combination of things. You have to bring what the limitations are into focus. And the severe one, to my mind, is the limitation of time. Now I do not think that you can expand television-network news indefinitely, or any other news. I can't expect people to sit there four or five hours a night to get all the news they need. They're never going to get all the news they need by television. They're going to have to go to print for the bulk of the information each

day.

But if we could expand to an hour, my format for that would be to take most of the items we do—not the film pieces necessarily, but the pieces that I do in just the 20-second version of something that happened in a

Washington hearing—and I'd expand it to 40 seconds, to get a couple of parenthetical phrases in there, a couple of hanging participial clauses in there, that might explain that story just a little bit better than I'm able to explain it in 20 seconds.

If we could do that, we would find a great deal of the problems that we have in being misunderstood by the public—the fact that we seem to be writing headlines, and we're only getting headlines—and we all know that headlines can be misinterpreted—we'd at least get the second deck of the headline into that story. And I think that would help.

Now, what we're never going to have, I'm afraid, is our own news-gathering staff to the depth that I would like to see it, to make us reasonably independent of the press services. And, as a consequence, we have to go on the air with a lot of material that is handed to us by a press agency. I wish that were not so.

Q: Why can't you have a staff to do that?

CRONKITE: Because the outlet, the half-hour, the limited time, makes it totally uneconomic to have a staffer in Kansas City, for instance, when we get one story in two years from Kansas City. That's just not the best way to use your resources. And we don't have the resources.

Q: Couldn't you have a special staff to do investigative reporting?

CRONKITE: We do have that. I'd definitely like to have more.

REASONER: This is partly psychological, isn't it, Walter? I remember the last scoop I got as a reporter was in 1959. And I discussed it with the executive producer of the C.B.S. evening news and he said it's a hell of a story. He said, "Let's leak it to the paper and we'll use it tomorrow night." We didn't want to go with it at that point, we were still digesting and editing and repeating the newspapers. This, I think, has changed very greatly.

Q: Isn't it true that when

network news was expanded from 15 minutes to a half hour, the extra 15 minutes was largely taken up with feature-type of stuff?

CRONKITE: No. I think that's absolutely false.

CHANCELLOR: People used to say to me, "What will you do at N.B.C. if C.B.S. goes to an hour?" And my answer was always, "Go to 15 minutes." I think that the half-hour news program has a sort of proper shape. I'm not sure that people in the United States will spend an hour looking at serious news every night. But I subscribe absolutely to what Walter says about more staff and better facilities with which to do our work.

Q: Do you feel that some of the attacks by the Government might be occasioned by the fact that you are stars and personalities to the public?

SMITH: My guess would be that to some extent that's true, that if we were anonymous people who change as the B.B.C. announcers do—every program you have a different man, and you don't announce his name anymore—that would probably get less resentment. But they have people to fixate on with us there, and I think that probably adds a little.

REASONER: Surveys keep showing that with all of the stirring-up of people, that still if you go out and ask people who they believe, Walter would rate substantially ahead of the Vice President or any politician.

CRONKITE: I also noticed in the same poll they threw out a name—Joe Smith or something—of a nonexistent individual, and he came in higher than a lot of Senators. It shows the validity is questionable.

But I think I agree that this is a factor unquestionably. If you can focus the attack on individuals it helps. Now they haven't done that to this extent in broadcasting. I think that in the public statements they haven't come down to aiming at Walter Cronkite or Harry Reasoner, John Chancellor or Howard Smith.

CHANCELLOR: I really think that we're talking about something that goes beyond personalities and goes into an institutional dispute. It's two institutions—the Administration and the national press in this country. And I think if we were all automatons, if you had robots giving the news, they would then be attacking the writers of that news, the

producers and editors of that news.

Q: To what extent are the four of you responsible for the selection of stories?

CHANCELLOR: I work with an executive producer and he and his staff have a lot to do with choosing the stories that go on the air. Where I come into it is in the organization of that, an occasional suggestion, which I hope is followed through, and in pretty much the layout of the program during a particular day. And also the copy that goes into it as

opposed to the filmed stories and features we have.

CRONKITE: I think the only place that I do not have a direct element of control is in the actual editing of film. That's because of the time problem. It's something one man simply can't do and also handle the flow of the news during the day.

REASONER: It would be fairly rare that I would make up the line-up. I don't know how Howard works it in Washington, but I'm there, I read the wires, I read the transcript of what film is in and available, and I would assume I have substantial influence, although I don't, for instance, participate in the 11 o'clock meeting that says what's going to happen.

SMITH: I probably have less influence, Harry, because of geography and difficulty of communicating. But whenever I object strongly to something I make that known to our producer, who can stay close to things.

REASONER: Also it's a big news organization. I think it would be pretentious. We've gone past the "I'm so-and-so and here's the news I covered today."

CRONKITE: For every person who thinks that there's the cab driver who, when you're going to work at 9:30 in the morning, says, "What are you doing going in now? You're not on till 7 o'clock," there are just as many people who believe we do nothing, that we're news readers. And I'm terribly interested in disabusing them of that fact.

Q: What's the case either for or against TV newsmen getting exactly the same First Amendment privileges as print newsmen?

REASONER: The case is all for it. There is no case against it.

CHANCELLOR: We feel it

goes down to anybody who has anything to do with getting the news on the air.

CRONKITE: I think the phoniest argument in the world is that because we are regulated, therefore we do not have First Amendment rights. I just can't follow the legal labyrinth that comes to that conclusion. It makes no sense to me.

Q: Are you doing anything about fighting for this?

CHANCELLOR: I think most of our bosses have testified for the most complete kind of embracing shield law. And if asked I'll spare no effort. I really feel very strongly about this because it applies to us as well as to newspapermen. What we seem to be getting to in the country now is that if I want to talk to somebody privately and confidentially I have to say, "Anything that you may say to me may be used in evidence against you."

SMITH: Or, "I may be willing to go to jail." You could say that, you know. Let's have some dissent in this. I'm against the shield law. Unless things get a lot worse than they are, I don't want a shield law for anybody. I think it involves too many complexities that haven't been thought out.

For one thing, you've got to define who a reporter is. The so-called underground press, some newsletters. If you said that anybody who gives news out, what's to prevent a mobster from writing a newsletter and saying, "I'm a journalist; I can't testify?"

I think ambiguity has its value. The British have been ambiguous about a Constitution all their history and it's worked. And I think we should leave the First Amendment there and fight each case one by one. We're not alone. Fifty bills have been introduced in Congress on our behalf.

CRONKITE: I'm opposed to any shield law that has conditions. I'm an absolutist in this regard and I take a little different position than Howard here. I believe that anything short of an absolute privilege is dangerous—very dangerous. It hands the Congress, it would seem, the right to pass laws regarding freedoms of speech and press. I don't like that part of the absolute law. But the Supreme Court in the *Caldwell* case invited the legislation, it seems, and perhaps

that's the way to do it—with an absolute privilege. But anything short of that is highly dangerous.

REASONER: I was going to say that any law except unconditionally — and you aren't going to get an unconditional law—any other law is limiting.

SMITH: I think an absolute law is bad, too, if I can continue this dissent. It means, theoretically, that you can be a witness to a murder and you could not be required to testify. You may be the only witness to a murder. It means an experience like I had in Birmingham.

When I left C.B.S. we were doing a documentary on Birmingham. And I was tipped off that they were going to beat the hell out of the First Freedom Riders. I went to the bus station and I watched this phenomenon of the police leaving the streets, all the patrol cars leaving the streets, and these hoodlums taking over. The buses arrived. They climbed in. They beat these people.

I met one of them in Flint, Mich., the other day. He's hospitalized for life. He's paralyzed. Another had 26 stitches taken in his face.

I knew who was behind it. Now I think I should have been subpoenaed. Well, I didn't wait. I volunteered.

CRONKITE: That's the point, Howard. I think that the number of cases where you would have abuse of an absolute privilege would be very rare compared to the freedom to report, which would be granted by absolute privilege.

I would rather have the people protected by freedom to report and accept a few abuses where somebody would not volunteer the information, because I would assume in almost 99 cases out of 100, a reporter is going to cooperate to the extent of giving information.